A historical overview of grazing in rangelands in California

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Abstract

Almost all of California was once a rangeland, and much of it still is today. The iconic legacy of the livestock industry has shaped the state’s culture and environment, and it will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. That future will be shaped by past events, but also by current decisions. After 242 years of ranching history in California, many crucial policy and management questions remain. This includes the most basic question of all: What do ranchers, property owners, range managers, and Californians more generally want from their rangelands?

The history of grazing in California began at the outset of the Mission era in 1769. During the nineteenth century, the livestock industry experienced a series of booms, busts, transformations, and reorganizations. Semi-wild cattle proliferated and formed vast herds during the Mexican rancho period. The Gold Rush and subsequent population explosion created new markets during a time when most people still believed that the state’s rangeland resources were inexhaustible. This attitude declined only after a series of disasters denuded the range, nearly destroyed the industry, and left indelible—often irreversible—imprints on the state’s landscapes.

The conservation movement of the early twentieth century attempted to instill some sense of order. By the 1930s, most ranchers considered themselves conservationists. In the post World War II era, range managers embraced a more narrowly focused vision of land productivity. Ambitious experiments sought to transform California’s rangelands into efficient factories for the production of livestock to supply a growing population. In the 1970s, scientists and managers began to question the goals and assumptions of the previous generation. This led to political conflict and regulatory confusion. Eventually, it fostered the creation of new partnerships, approaches, and institutions—based on education and research—that sought to promote a more inclusive, integrative, and comprehensive version of rangeland conservation.

During the past twenty-five years, California’s rangelands have undergone profound changes due to complex social, cultural, economic, and ecological processes. Rangelands have been subdivided so that many small landholdings have replaced fewer large parcels. The values of these parcels have risen sharply as rural areas become increasingly suburban or exurban. Properties change now owners more frequently than in the past. Most newer property owners do not receive the majority of their income from livestock, and they tend to manage their parcels for amenities rather than commodities. Grazing has declined dramatically on some public lands, particularly in arid regions such as the Mojave Desert, where officials now work to produce wildlife and endangered species instead of livestock. Conservationists, including ranchers, have done much to promote the sustainable management of working landscapes. In areas such as the Mojave, however, there seems to be little future for livestock on the range.